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ABSTRACT

This report discusses outcomes of a study that conducted telephone interviews with 1,000 adults to investigate their awareness and attitudes toward learning disabilities and attitudinal changes since 1995, to explore parents' recognition of various behaviors or symptoms as indicators of possible learning disabilities, and to determine what level of difficulty a child must exhibit for parents to perceive that help is necessary. Results found: (1) public understanding of learning disabilities has improved since 1995, and more people can correctly identify possible indicators of learning disabilities; (2) three in four adults say they have at least some familiarity with learning disabilities; (3) the vast majority of the public recognized that children with learning disabilities are "just as smart as you and me," and that they process words and information differently; (4) four in ten parents have considered that one of their children might have a serious problem with learning or schoolwork; (5) pediatricians and teachers are the sources parents are most likely to turn to for information about learning disabilities; (6) four in ten people advocate developing more resources for students with learning disabilities; and (7) most believe that early intervention will have a positive impact on individuals and on society. (CR)

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Measuring Progress in Public & Parental Understanding of Learning Disabilities

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Prepared for Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation

March 2000

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Introduction

In 1995, the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation undertook groundbreaking research to measure public awareness and understanding of learning disabilities. The results of that first benchmark study revealed that, although Americans recognize that learning disabilities are prevalent, these disabilities are widely misunderstood.

The current research revisits key issues addressed in that first study to capture any changes in attitudes and understanding in the intervening five years. Much of the news is heartening; progress has been made. Far fewer Americans today identify physical disabilities such as *blindness* and *deafness* as being linked with learning disabilities. And fewer people than in 1995 believe that *mental retardation* is associated with learning disabilities.

Yet two-thirds (65%) of Americans still link learning disabilities to mental retardation when, in fact, most people with learning disabilities are of average or above average intelligence. This one disconnect alone has potentially devastating consequences, whether thinking about how individuals with learning disabilities are treated by other people, how they are educated, or how programs to help them are funded at the state and national level.

Beyond measuring changes in understanding among the general public since 1995, this new research was designed to explore the opinions and attitudes of a key constituency: parents of children under 18 years old. Why parents? Parents are the first line of defense for getting young children with learning disabilities the help they need, and parents can become passionate advocates on behalf of learning-disabled children.

With respect to the attitudes of parents, much of the news is also positive. The vast majority of parents clearly say that learning disabilities are on their radar screens – more so than ever before. And parents with children under 18 in their household are better informed than other people on many issues related to learning disabilities.

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However, it is clear that parents still harbor many potentially harmful misconceptions. Fears about the stigma attached to individuals diagnosed as having learning disabilities continue to be a major stumbling block to children's receiving the help they need.

With this research and this report, the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation seeks to offer insights for the individuals and groups that are working on the many issues related to learning disabilities.

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Research Objectives

One of the major goals of this study, and of the previous research conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide for the Tremaine Foundation, is to measure the extent of confusion and uncertainty that exists with people's perceptions about what constitutes a learning disability.

The research project has been designed to meet several key research objectives:

- To update core questions from the benchmark study among adult Americans, measuring the extent to which awareness, understanding, and attitudes about learning disabilities have changed since 1995

- To explore parents' recognition of various behaviors or symptoms as indicators of possible learning disabilities

- To determine what level of difficulty a child must exhibit for parents to perceive that help is necessary, and to identify what sources of support and guidance parents would turn to for effective handling of children with learning disabilities

As a point of common understanding, this study uses the following definition of learning disabilities and accepts it as the best current working definition available. It was presented to respondents midway through the questionnaire as a brief statement that defines what learning disabilities are:

> "Adults and children with learning disabilities are as smart as their peers – but they have one or more difficulties with how they process and communicate spoken or written language. It may show up as a problem in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or in doing math. The term does not include people whose learning disabilities are mainly caused by physical or mental problems such as blindness, deafness, or mental retardation – nor does the term refer to people whose learning disabilities are mainly caused by environmental or economic disadvantages, or by cultural differences."

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Research Design and Methodology

Telephone interviews were conducted with a nationwide cross section of 1,000 adults ages 18 and older, and an oversample of approximately 700 parents with children under 18 currently living in their household. Utilizing a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) sampling methodology to locate respondents, interviews were conducted November 9 through December 23, 1999.

Respondents without children under 18 currently living in their household completed a shorter nine-minute survey. Respondents (or parents) with children under 18 currently living in their household completed a longer 22-minute survey.

Replicating as much as possible the research design used in 1995, the current study (both for parents and other people) followed a "pre-test/post-test" structure. Interviews began with a "blind" discussion of attitudes toward and knowledge about learning disabilities prior to providing respondents with an actual definition of what learning disabilities are. The remainder of the questions were then answered in light of the definition that had been provided.

The findings in this report are projectable to the universe of the adults 18 and older in the United States within a sampling error of ± 3%. The margin of sampling error is larger on subgroups. A minimum amount of weighting was applied to bring the sample in line with current Census data on gender, age, and region.

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Executive Summary

Knowledge and Awareness

- **Public understanding of learning disabilities has improved since 1995. And more people today can correctly identify possible indicators of learning disabilities.**

  Since 1995, there have been marked declines in the proportions of people who erroneously attribute learning disabilities to *physical disabilities* such as deafness (45%, down 21 points) and blindness (38%, down 22 points).

  People are also less likely today than in the past to mistakenly associate *mental retardation* (65%, down 20 points), *emotional disorders* (59%, down 18 points), and Attention Deficit Disorder (66%, down 15 points).

  Some of the behaviors that people today are most likely to consider possible indicators of learning disabilities are: average or above average intelligence, but having trouble learning; trouble concentrating; trouble organizing information; reversing numbers and letters; trouble learning how to read.

- **Three in four adult Americans say they have at least some familiarity with learning disabilities.**

  Three-fourths (75%) of the public say they have at least some familiarity with learning disabilities. About one-third (34%) report having heard or read *a lot* about learning disabilities, while another 41% say they have heard or read *some* information about this issue.

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- **The vast majority of the public recognize to a certain extent that children with learning disabilities are "just as smart as you and me" – and that they "process words and information differently."**

  Eighty-five percent of people say it is somewhat to completely accurate that "children with learning disabilities process words and information differently."

  Eight in ten people (79%) say the statement that "children with learning disabilities are just as smart as you and me" is somewhat to completely accurate.

Parents' Assessment of Potential Signs of Learning Disabilities

- **With regard to potentially troubling behavior by four- to five-year-old children, parents[1] overwhelmingly adopt a "wait and see" attitude for at least a few months to a couple of years. Only trouble with social skills is likely to be considered a sign of a serious problem by a sizable number of parents.**

  Two-thirds of parents say they think behaviors such as trouble rhyming, staying seated, forming letters or matching letters with sounds, and following simple directions – *all of which could be signs of a serious learning problem* – are something that a four- to five-year-old will outgrow.

  A sizable plurality of parents (43%) consider having trouble making friends or getting along with other children a sign of some serious problem in young children age four to five. Fifty percent of parents, however, assume that, even with reference to social skills, "This too will pass."

[1] In this study, the term "parents" refers to those with children under 18 currently living in their household.

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- **Parents of six- to seven-year-old children are more likely to view academic difficulties as signs of a serious problem. A majority of parents also allow a few months up to a couple of years for school-age children to outgrow difficulties before becoming concerned.**

  Half of parents consider academic difficulties such as making repeated errors with reading or spelling (48%), having trouble counting and working with numbers (48%), and having trouble following simple directions or routines (47%) signs of a serious problem in children age six to seven.

  Among parents who consider various academic difficulties in school-age children to be signs of a serious problem, four in ten say the child would have to show signs of difficulty reading, spelling, counting, or following directions for at least a few months before they considered it a sign of a serious problem. Another 19% say they would wait about one year or a couple of years or more.

- **Four in ten parents have considered at one time or another that one of their children might have a serious problem with learning or schoolwork.**

  Among parents who have considered whether their child might have a learning problem, seven in ten (69%) say they are very concerned their child might not succeed in school (this figure represents 27% of all parents).

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- **Most parents say they witnessed their children exhibiting difficulties for at least a few months or a year or more before they began to believe the child might have a serious problem with learning.**

  Thirty-one percent of parents who noticed their children exhibiting signs of problems with learning say it took at least a few months before they believed that their child might have a serious problem. Forty-four percent waited for their child to exhibit signs of difficulty for a year or more before acknowledging that their child might have a problem. Twenty-four percent say they waited one year; 20% waited a couple of years or more.

- **Most parents still say they turn to experts for help – but they also are proactively seeking information for themselves.**

  Pediatricians (67%, down 7 points since 1995) and teachers (66%, unchanged) are the sources parents are most likely to turn to for information about learning disabilities.

  More than half (58%) of parents say it is very likely that they would turn to groups or associations concerned with learning disabilities for information about this condition.

Exploring the Stigma Associated with Learning Disabilities

- **Most parents say they would notify their child's teacher if they suspected the child of having a learning disability – yet underlying concerns about social stigma still exist.**

  This is evidenced by the finding that, although 72% of parents say they personally would talk with a child's teacher, only 52% of parents say other parents would notify a teacher.

  Nearly half of parents (48%) agree that, in the long run, it causes children and adults more trouble to be labeled as learning disabled than if they struggle privately with their learning problems. However, an equal proportion of parents (48%) reject this notion.

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- **Parents say that children with learning disabilities are "different but just as good" as other children. However, parents perceive that LD children struggle with self-esteem.**

  Nearly two-thirds of parents (64%) think that most parents with learning-disabled children view them as *"different but just as good"* as other children, compared to 17% of parents who think that most parents perceive children with learning disabilities as different but not as good as other children.

  Nearly two-thirds (63%) of parents feel that children with learning disabilities view themselves as different but not as good as other children – yet another reason that parents might consciously or unconsciously resist or delay having their children tested for and diagnosed with learning disabilities.

Support for Learning-Disabled Children

- **The public remain divided on whether or not additional resources should be devoted to services for learning-disabled children.**

  Four in ten (41%, compared to 45% in 1995) people advocate devoting more resources to the learning-disabled. However, 43% of people today, compared to 45% in 1995, do not support the idea of allocating additional resources to the learning-disabled and feel instead that resources should be spent on basic services for all children.

- **Most parents believe that early diagnosis of and intervention in learning disabilities will have a positive impact on individual children and on society.**

  Nearly two-thirds (63%) of parents strongly agree that early diagnosis and intervention of learning disabilities is cost-effective for society because, without proper help, many learning disabled children drop out of school and often cannot hold jobs.

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The overwhelming majority of parents feel that children with learning disabilities require special treatment. A plurality of parents feel that a combination of extra patience and special skills is required to help learning-disabled children.

Nine in ten parents feel that children with learning disabilities require special treatment in terms of the amount of individual attention they receive from teachers or counselors (89%) and the availability of specially trained teachers (89%).

Forty-six percent of parents feel that both special training and extra patience are required to help children with learning disabilities. Somewhat fewer (33%) feel that working with LD children requires only extra patience and understanding. And even fewer (20%) believe that special skills and training alone are sufficient.

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I. Americans' Knowledge About Learning Disabilities

Key Areas of Improvement Since 1995

- **Public understanding of learning disabilities has improved since 1995.**

  Since 1995, there have been marked declines in the proportions of people who erroneously attribute learning disabilities to *physical disabilities* such as deafness (45%, down 21 points) and blindness (38%, down 22 points).

  People are also less likely today than in the past to mistakenly associate *mental retardation* (65%, down 20 points), *emotional disorders* (59%, down 18 points), and Attention Deficit Disorder (66%, down 15 points).

  Younger people are less likely to link mental retardation to LDs. Seven in 10 (69%) people 35 and older incorrectly associate *mental retardation* with learning disabilities, compared to 57% of adults 18 to 34 years of age.

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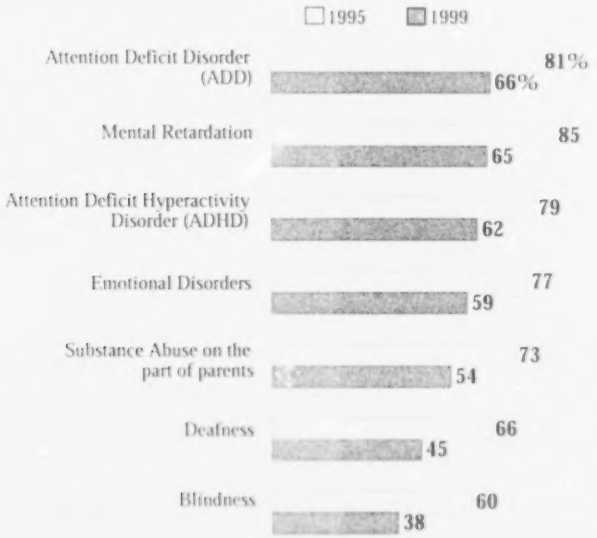
[Q. 4/18] Base: Total

% think the following are associated with learning disabilities



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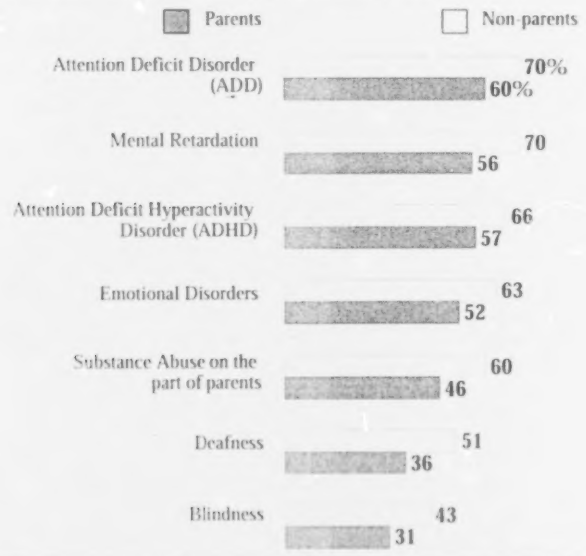
- **Parents[2] of children under 18 generally have a clearer understanding of conditions associated with learning disabilities than other people do.**

  In 1995, parents and nonparents, in almost equal measure, mistakenly associated learning disabilities with various physical and mental conditions such as mental retardation, blindness, emotional disorders, and Attention Deficit Disorder. Today, however, fewer parents with children under 18 (than other people) mistakenly associate learning disabilities with these conditions.

[Q. 4/18] Base: Total

% think the following are associated with learning disabilities



[2] In this study, the term "parents" refers to those with children under 18 currently living in their household.

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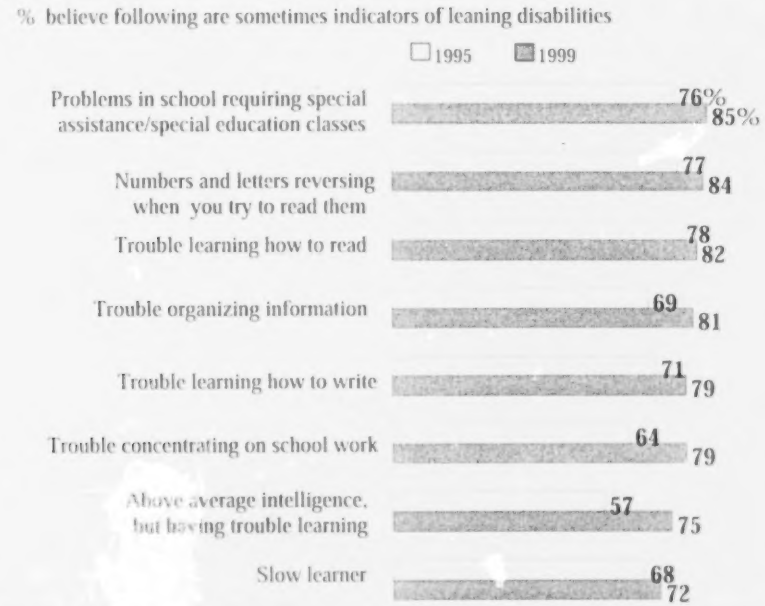
- **More people today than in 1995 can correctly identify possible indicators of learning disabilities.**

  Some of the behaviors that people today are most likely to consider possible indicators of learning disabilities are:

  - Average or above average intelligence, but having trouble learning (75%, up 18 points since 1995)
  - Trouble concentrating (79%, up 15 points)
  - Trouble organizing information (81%, up 12 points)
  - Problems in school requiring special assistance or classes (85%, up 9 points)
  - Reversing numbers and letters (84%, up 7 points)
  - Trouble learning how to read (82%, up 4 points)

[Q.3/17] Base: Total



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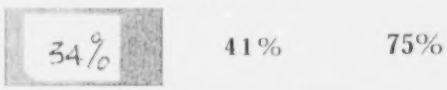
New Measures of Awareness and Understanding

- **Three in four adult Americans say they have at least some familiarity with learning disabilities.**

  The American people say the topic of learning disabilities is on their radar screens. Three-fourths (75%) say they have heard or read some to a lot about the topic. About one-third (34%) report having heard *a lot* about learning disabilities; another 41% say they have heard or read *some* information about this issue.

[Q.1/14] Base: Total

% say have heard or read a lot /some about learning disabilities



- **Parents are most aware of education efforts about learning disabilities.**

  Two-thirds (67%) of parents strongly agree that you *hear more about learning disabilities now than ever before.* And eight in ten parents (84%) say they have heard some to a lot about learning disabilities. More than four in ten parents (41%) report that they have heard or read *a lot* about the topic (compared to 30% of other people.)

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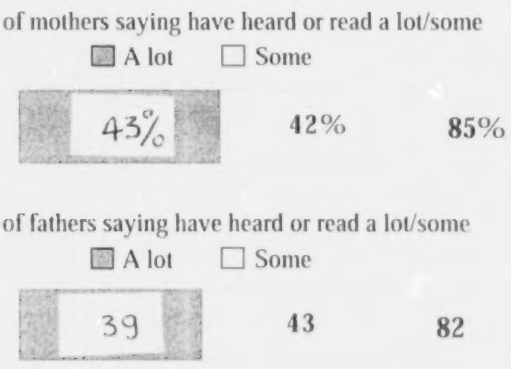
Women, in general, report having heard more about learning disabilities than men do – but *fathers* are as familiar with the subject as *mothers*.

Eight in ten (79%) women have heard or read some to a lot about learning disabilities, as have 71% of men.

Women **without children under 18 currently in the household** are more likely than men (by a margin of 75% to 64%) to say they have heard a lot or some about LDs. One-third (37%) of these women say they have read *a lot*, compared to one in five men (22%).

However, these gender differences diminish when we look at women and men **with children under 18 in their households.** Here, fathers are nearly as likely as mothers to have heard or read about learning disabilities.

[Q.1/14] Base: Total



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- **The vast majority of the public recognize to a certain extent that children with learning disabilities are "*just as smart as you and me*" – and that they "*process words and information differently.*"**

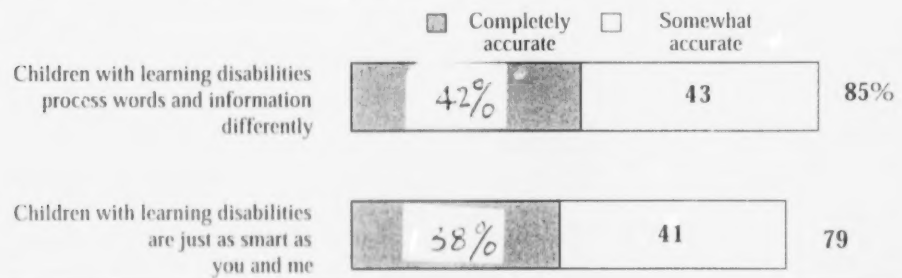
  - Eighty-five percent of people say it is somewhat to completely accurate that *"children with learning disabilities process words and information differently."* However, only about four in ten (42%) agree that this statement is completely accurate.

  - Eight in ten people (79%) say the statement that *"children with learning disabilities are just as smart as you and me"* is somewhat to completely accurate. However, only 38% describe this statement as completely accurate.

    Parents of children under 18 again reveal that they are somewhat better informed than the general public. Parents are more likely than other people to say it is completely accurate that children with LDs are just as smart, by a margin of 42% to 35%.

[Q.2/16] Base: Total

% consider following statements completely/somewhat accurate



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Continuing Areas of Confusion – Even Among People with Personal Experience with Learning Disabilities

- **Among the public, some confusion still exists about possible indicators of and conditions associated with learning disabilities.**

  - Fewer people than in 1995 identify *dyslexia* as being associated with learning disabilities (68%, down 13 points).

    In general, however, people with higher education levels are more likely to correctly identify dyslexia as an LD. Three in four (77%) people with a college degree or more identify *dyslexia* as being associated with learning disabilities. In contrast, 69% of those with some college and 63% of people with a high school education or less correctly recognize dyslexia as a learning disability.

  - Assessment of *hyperactivity* as being a possible indicator of learning disabilities has increased since 1995, from 58% to 69% today. In actuality, hyperactivity is a separate condition that individuals sometimes have in addition to learning disabilities. But hyperactivity is not, by itself, an indicator for LDs.

    Again, we see differences in understanding of hyperactivity among parents with different education levels. Fifty-seven percent of parents with some college or less education incorrectly identify hyperactivity as being an indication of a learning disability. Fewer parents with a college degree or more (48%) incorrectly perceive hyperactivity as an indicator for LDs.

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Parents of children under 18 – with some personal experience with learning disabilities – most likely misidentify dyslexia and hyperactivity.

- Some 80% of parents who say they have personal experience with LDs (either themselves, with a child, or with someone else) also say hyperactivity is sometimes a sign of learning disability.

- Only 64% of parents (of children under 18) with some personal experience with LDs identify dyslexia as a condition sometimes associated with learning disabilities. Contrast this with the 77% of people (without children under 18) with personal experience with LDs who say dyslexia is associated with learning disabilities.

Why is there increased confusion since 1995 on these measures?

It is not possible, from these data, to give a definitive answer for why confusion about these two terms has increased since 1995. One hypothesis is that the misunderstanding of these two terms could actually be attributed to heightened awareness of learning disabilities and related issues.

Perhaps as people hear and learn more about the generic phrase "learning disabilities," they perceive or guess that *dyslexia* is a specific and separate condition. Or perhaps the wording – "associated with" – seems inaccurate to more knowledgeable respondents. More important is the finding that more people today than in 1995 recognize that "numbers and letters reversing when you try to read them" is sometimes an indication of learning disabilities.

Hyperactivity has received a tremendous amount of press coverage in the past five years, much of it discussing effects on children's academic performance. And *hyperactivity*, in contrast to the more clinical sounding *attention deficit disorder* (ADD) and *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder* (ADHD), is perhaps perceived as a broader generic term that might encompass many different behaviors.

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What's more, learning disabilities and hyperactivity are coexistent in some children. Thus, again, the question wording used both in 1995 and in 1999 – which asks whether various conditions may sometimes be an indicator of learning disabilities – could also be a factor in these results. The question phrasing may induce laymen with the potentially greatest knowledge of this topic (that is, parents of children under 18 with some personal experience with LDs) to answer this question differently than in 1995 because of their increased knowledge. Or perhaps, the message that hyperactivity is coexistent but not strictly associated with LDs has indeed become muddled for parents in the past five years.

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II. Parents' Assessments of Potential Signs of Learning Disabilities

New Area of Investigation

Assessing Behavior in Four- to Five-Year-Old Children

- **With regard to potentially troubling behavior by four- to five-year-old children, large majorities of parents adopt a "wait and see" attitude.**

Parents were asked,

> "If you saw a typical four- to five-year-old child regularly do each of the following, would you think it was something the child will grow out of, or would you think it was a sign of some serious problem?"

Close to two-thirds or more of all parents say they think each of the following behaviors – that could be signs of a serious learning problem – were something that a four- to five-year-old would grow out of:

- Having trouble rhyming (78%)
- Having trouble staying seated at meals or in class (75%)
- Having trouble forming letters correctly (75%)
- Having trouble matching letters with their sounds (70%)
- Following simple directions or routines (63%)

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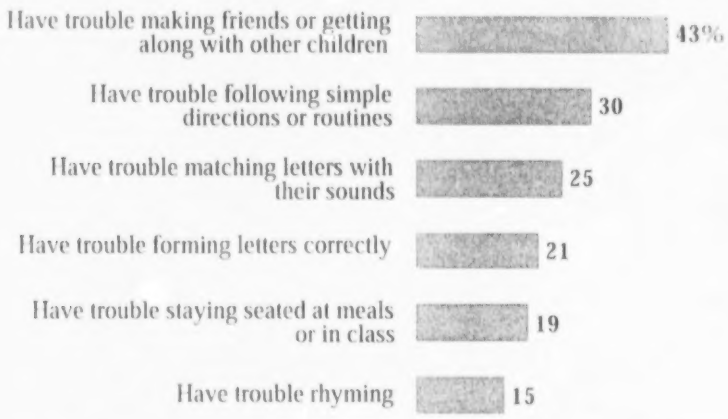
- **Trouble with social skills in four- to five-year-old children is more likely to be considered a sign of a serious problem – but still not overwhelmingly.**

  A sizable plurality (43%) of parents consider having trouble making friends or getting along with other children a sign of some serious problem in young children age four to five. Fifty percent of parents, however, assume that, even with regard to social skills, "This too will pass."

[Q. 7a] Base: Parents with children < 18

% if saw a typical 4-to-5 year old regularly do each of the following would tend to think it was a serious problem rather than something the child will grow out of



"Wait and See" for How Long?

- Among the minority of parents who consider these various behaviors to be indicators of a serious problem, roughly four in ten would not consider four- to five-year-old children's exhibition of these behaviors a problem unless the behavior endured for at least a few months. Another approximately 18% of parents say they would have to see these signs for a year to a couple of years – constituting nearly one in five children with learning disabilities.

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Parents who feel that being labeled with an LD is worse than struggling privately are more likely to believe that four- to five-year-old children will outgrow some behaviors.

Parents who believe it causes children more trouble to be labeled with having an LD (than to struggle privately) are more likely to say children will outgrow some behaviors, including "making friends and getting along." Fifty-four percent of parents who are more concerned about labeling say children will outgrow social problems, compared to 46% of parents who say it causes more trouble to struggle privately.

Parents who are more concerned about labeling are also more likely (by a margin of 81% to 74%) to say children will grow out of trouble with rhyming.

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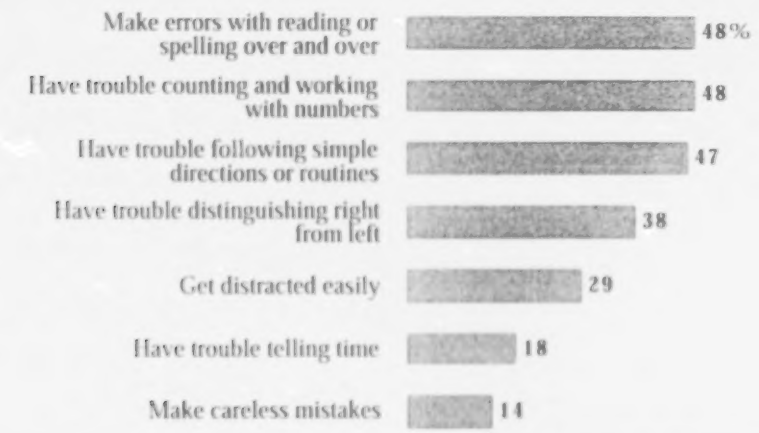
Assessing Behavior in Six to Seven-Year-Old Children

- **Parents of six to seven-year-old children are more likely to view academic difficulties as signs of a serious problem.**

  Half of parents consider academic difficulties such as making repeated errors with reading or spelling (48%), having trouble counting and working with numbers (48%), and having trouble following simple directions or routines (47%) signs of a serious problem in children age six to seven.

[Q. 8] Base: Parents with child en < 18

% if saw a typical 6-to-7 year-old regularly do each of the following would tend to think it was a serious problem rather than something the child will grow out of



Fewer than one in five parents say having *trouble learning to tell time* is a sign of a serious problem; 77% of parents say six- to seven-year-old children will grow out of it. And 58% of parents say children will outgrow *trouble distinguishing left from right* – indicating perhaps that parents do not yet understand that, if problems with these two skills persist, that they might be signs of a problem.

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- **Mothers and fathers have somewhat different ideas about what behaviors are signs of trouble in children six to seven years old.**

  It is interesting to note that mothers are more likely than fathers to perceive that six- to seven-year-old children will outgrow trouble telling time (80% mothers; 73% fathers) and distinguishing right from left (62% mothers; 54% fathers). However, mothers are more likely than fathers to perceive that trouble with following simple directions is a sign of a serious problem. Fifty-two percent of mothers (versus 41% of fathers) say trouble following directions in children this age is serious.

  Mothers and fathers also name different behaviors when asked (in an open-ended question) what they think would be *specific signs of learning disabilities in children.* "Lack of attention" or "attention span" was the number one response for both mothers and fathers. However, fathers are somewhat more likely to name (by a margin of 39% for fathers and 33% for mothers) problems with attention. Mothers are more likely than fathers to name other symptoms, such as difficulty with reading or recognizing letters, ability to comprehend, writing skills, social problems, and feelings of frustration as signs of learning disabilities in children.

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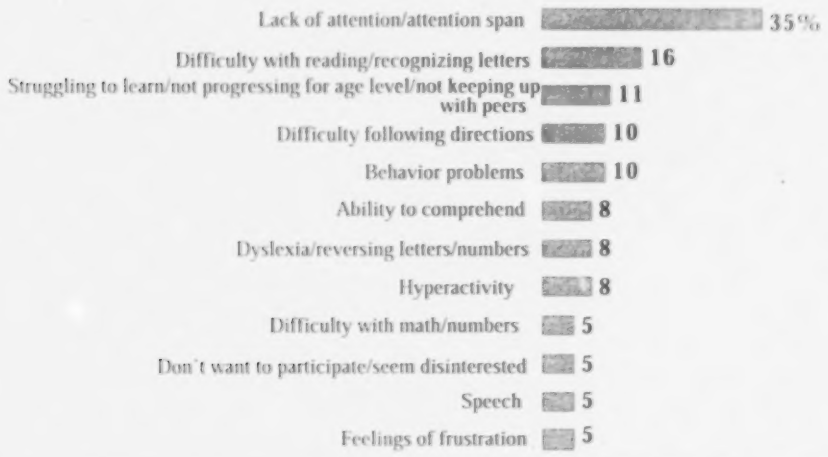
[Q. 15] Base: Parents with children < 18

% think following are specific signs of learning disabilities in children (unprompted responses)


Lack of attention/attention span 35%
Difficulty with reading/recognizing letters 16
Struggling to learn/not progressing for age level/not keeping up with peers 11
Difficulty following directions 10
Behavior problems 10
Ability to comprehend 8
Dyslexia/reversing letters/numbers 8
Hyperactivity 8
Difficulty with math/numbers 5
Don't want to participate/seem disinterested 5
Speech 5
Feelings of frustration 5

- **The majority of parents also allow a few months up to a couple of years for school-age children to outgrow difficulties before becoming concerned.**

  Among parents who consider various academic difficulties in school-age children to be signs of a serious problem, four in ten say the child would have to show signs of difficulty reading, spelling, counting, or following directions for a least a few months before they considered it to be a sign of a serious problem.

  - Another 19% say they would wait about one year or a couple of years or more. This is critical, since it could translate into a school year or two without help for some 20% of children with learning disabilities.

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III. Attitudes and Behaviors of Parents Concerned That a Child Might Have Learning Problems

- **Four in ten (40%) parents have considered at one time or another that one of their children might have a serious problem with learning or schoolwork.**

  Among parents who have considered whether their child might have a learning problem, seven in ten (69%) say they were very concerned their child might not succeed in school. This represents 27% of all parents.

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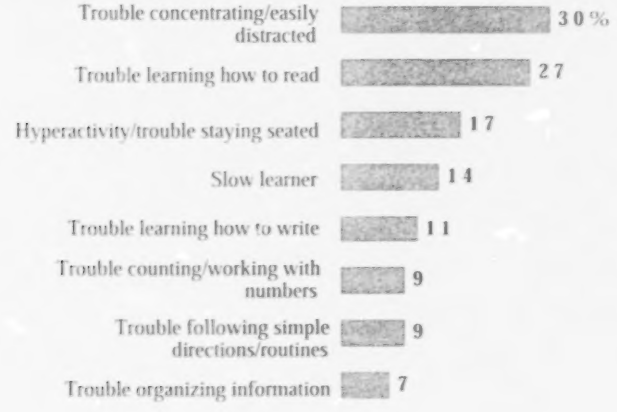
- **Trouble concentrating and difficulty learning to read are among the symptoms parents are most likely to associate with learning problems.**

  When asked, unprompted, what specific symptoms led them to believe their child might have a serious problem with learning or schoolwork, parents are most likely to cite trouble concentrating (30%), trouble learning to read (27%), and hyperactivity (17%).

  Smaller proportions of these parents mention trouble following simple directions or routines (9%), trouble organizing information (7%), and trouble making friends (4%) as symptoms of serious learning problems.

[Q. 12] Base: Parents with children < 18

% say specific symptoms demonstrated by their child led them to believe the child might have a serious problem with learning or school work



Top 8 mentions

Many of the signs parents associate with learning problems – such as learning to read and being a slow learner – are related to a child's academic performance. This is perhaps why parents age 35 to 54, who are more likely than parents age 18 to 34 to have school-age children, are also more likely to have considered at one time or another that one of their children might have a serious problem with learning. Nearly half (48%) of parents age 35 to 54 have, at one time or another, considered that their child might have serious problems with learning, compared to 28% of parents age 18 to 34.

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- **Many parents adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and wait for their children to show repeated signs of difficulty before becoming concerned.**

  Perhaps because they expect that children will outgrow the cognitive and, behavioral difficulties that may be associated with learning problems, many parents who have considered that their child might have problems with learning have waited for their child to show repeated signs of difficulty before becoming concerned. In fact, few parents (5%) became concerned after the child exhibited signs of trouble merely a couple of times.

  Thirty-one percent of parents who noticed their child exhibiting signs of problems with learning say it took at least a few months before they believed that their child might have a serious problem. Forty-four percent waited for their child to exhibit signs of difficulty for a year to a couple of years before acknowledging that their child might have a problem.

- **Mothers seem more prone than fathers to adopt a wait-and-see attitude when a child begins to show signs of difficulty with learning.**

  Half (49%) of mothers who believed their child might have problems with learning waited for their child to show signs of difficulty for a year or more before becoming concerned, compared to 35% of fathers.

  On the other hand, greater proportions of fathers (23%) than mothers (12%) say they became concerned that their child might have problems with learning after the child exhibited signs of difficulty for only a few weeks.

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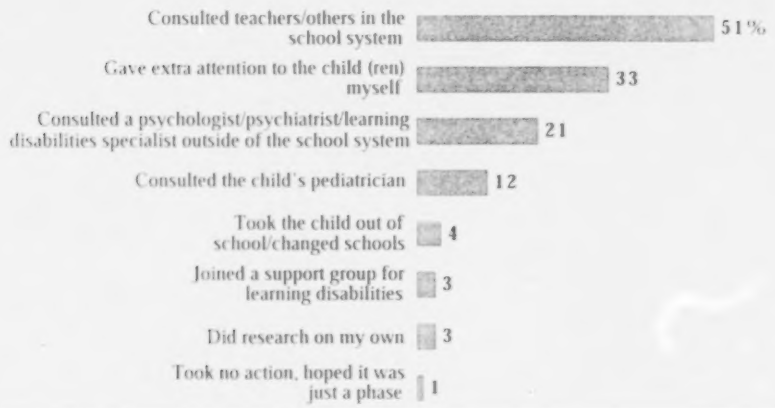
- **When formulating a strategy for coping with a child's learning problems, parents are likely to turn to professionals within the education system.**

  Nine in ten parents who have considered that their child might have difficulty learning say they were concerned their child might not succeed in school. The majority (51%) consulted teachers and others in the school system when it occurred to them that their child might have a learning problem.

  Parents are also apt to seek the opinions of professionals outside the field of education. One in five (21%) consulted a psychologist, psychiatrist or learning disabilities specialist outside of the school system. Another 12% consulted the child's pediatrician.

[Q. 11] Base: Parents with children < 18

% say did the following when it occurred to them that one of their children might have a serious problem with learning or school work


Consulted teachers/others in the school system
51%
Gave extra attention to the child (ren) myself
33
Consulted a psychologist/psychiatrist/learning disabilities specialist outside of the school system
21
Consulted the child's pediatrician
12
Took the child out of school/changed schools
4
Joined a support group for learning disabilities
3
Did research on my own
3
Took no action, hoped it was just a phase
1

- **Fathers, more than mothers, favor helping the child <u>privately</u>.**

  Four in ten (41%) fathers, compared to 27% of mothers, say they personally gave extra attention to their child when it occurred to them that their child might have a serious problem learning. In contrast, greater proportions of mothers (57%) than fathers (44%) say they consulted teachers or others in the school system when it occurred to them that their child might have a learning problem.

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IV. Exploring the Stigma Associated with Learning Disabilities

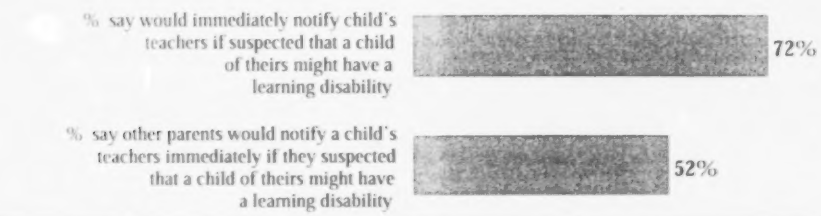
New Area of Investigation

- **Most parents say they would notify their child's teacher if they suspected that the child was having a learning disability – yet underlying concerns about social stigma still exist.**

  Seven in 10 parents (72%) say they would talk with the child's teacher if they had concerns that their child might have a learning disability. Twenty-five percent say they would help the child privately, without involving the child's teacher. (Among those who chose to help the child privately, 27% mention "knowing their child best" as a reason for their decision.)

  Yet there are strong signs of an underlying social stigma associated with admitting that a child has a learning disability. This is evidenced by the finding that, although 72% of parents say they personally would talk with a child's teacher, only 52% of parents say other parents would notify a teacher.

[Q. 20/20a] Base: Parents with children < 18


% say would immediately notify child's teachers if suspected that a child of theirs might have a learning disability
72%
% say other parents would notify a child's teachers immediately if they suspected that a child of theirs might have a learning disability
52%

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- **Concerns about underlying social stigmas associated with learning disabilities may be more prevalent among fathers than among mothers.**

  Fathers are more likely than mothers to say they would try to help a child themselves before enlisting the help of others. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of fathers say they would notify a teacher if they suspected that their child had a learning disability. However, a greater proportion of fathers (33%) than mothers (19%) say they would try to help the child privately first without involving the child's teachers.

  Heightened concerns among fathers about underlying social stigmas associated with LDs is further evidenced by the finding that nearly half (48%) of fathers think that most other parents would also help their child privately, compared to 35% of mothers.

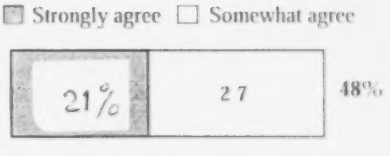
- **Parents are split on whether it benefits or harms people to be labeled learning-disabled.**

  Nearly half of parents (48%) agree that, in the long run, being labeled as learning-disabled causes children and adults more trouble than if they struggle privately with their learning problems. One in five (21%) parents agrees strongly with this statement.

  Forty-eight percent of parents, however, reject the notion that it causes children and adults more trouble to be labeled learning-disabled than it does if they struggle with their problem privately. In fact, 28% of parents strongly disagree with this statement.

[Q. 26] Base: Parents with children < 18

% agree with the following statement


Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
% In the long run, it causes children and adults more trouble to be labeled as learning disabled than if they struggle privately with their learning problems
21%
27
48%

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Fathers again appear more concerned about the social stigmas associated with learning disabilities. Fifty-three percent of fathers (compared to 44% of mothers) agree that, in the long run, being labeled as learning-disabled causes children and adults more trouble than struggling privately with their learning problems.

Such findings – when looked at in conjunction with fathers' tendency to delay in getting help – suggest that fathers may be a key group to whom information about the ultimate benefits of early diagnosis for children should be directed.

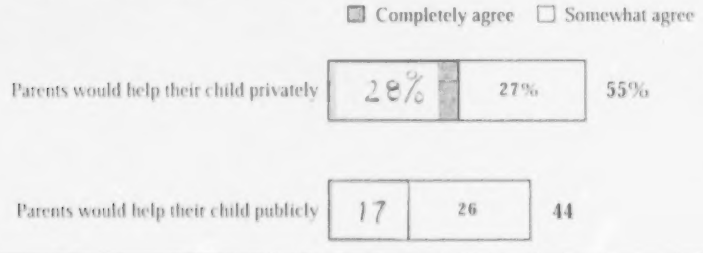
- **Concerns about underlying social stigmas apparently influence how parents choose to help their children cope with learning disabilities.**

  Parents who would choose to help their child privately (55%) are more likely than parents who would seek help publicly from educators and organizations (44%) to agree that being labeled as learning-disabled causes children and adults more trouble than does struggling privately with their learning problems.

[Q.26] Base: Parents with children <18

% agree with the following statement

In the long run, it causes children and adults more trouble to be labeled as learning disabled than if they struggle privately with their learning problems



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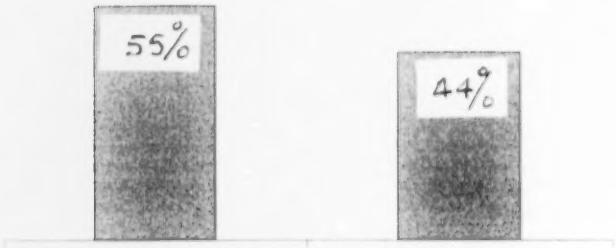
- **Parents are more likely than other people to understand that learning disabilities are not laziness in disguise.**

  The public is split over whether learning disabilities are *"sometimes . . . really just the result of laziness and are not disabilities."* Forty-eight percent agree learning disabilities are sometimes laziness; 48% disagree (reflecting no significant change since 1995). Parents of children under 18, however, are more inclined than other people to disagree with this statement, by a margin of 55% to 44%.

[Q. 6/26] Base: Total

% disagree strongly/somewhat with following statements

Sometimes what people call learning disabilities are really just the result of laziness and are not disabilities



Perhaps because mothers tend to have heard more than fathers have about leaning disabilities – 40% of mothers say they have heard or read a lot about LDs, compared to 29% of fathers – mothers are less inclined than fathers to attribute learning disabilities to laziness. Half (50%) of fathers agree that what people call learning disabilities are really just the result of laziness and are not disabilities, compared to 37% of mothers.

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College-educated parents (36%) – 51% of whom have heard or read a lot about LDs, compared to 39% of parents with some college education or less – are less likely than parents with some or no college education (45%) to attribute learning disabilities to laziness.

These data suggest that, in general, informing the public about learning disabilities does go a long way toward combating some of the stigmas associated with learning disabilities.

- **Attitudes toward the impact of the home environment on LDs provide clues to some of the underlying stigmas driving how parents react to LDs.**

  Currently 56% of all people say learning disabilities are often caused by the *home environment* children are raised in, down from 64% in 1995. Changing attitudes among parents are responsible for this decline.

  Since 1995, there has been a 15-point decline in the proportion of parents who attribute learning disabilities to the home environment. In contrast, the proportion of other people who hold this view has remained unchanged. Fewer parents today than in the past attribute learning disabilities to the home environment (44%, compared to 59% in 1995). However, there has been no significant change in the proportion of nonparents (66% in 1995 vs. 64% today) who hold this view.

  This drop in the proportion of parents who believe that the home environment is to blame – or will be blamed – is critical if parents are to feel free to have children diagnosed and treated.

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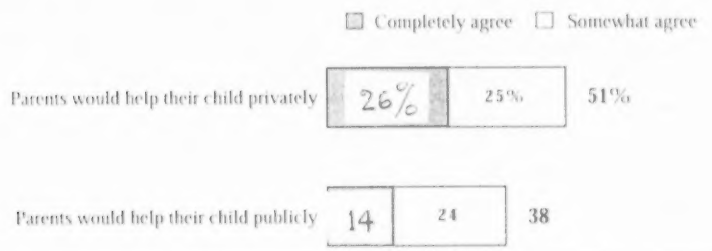
- **Parents who would choose to help learning-disabled children privately are more prone to view LDs as a reflection of the home environment.**

  Half (51%) of parents who would choose to help a learning-disabled child privately agree that learning disabilities are often caused by the home environment, compared to 38% of parents who would seek help publicly. These findings suggest that many parents who choose to help their child privately rather than to publicly admit to their child's disability may be embarrassed by their child's learning disability and may view it as a sign of deficiencies on their part. This is a further indication that continuing to teach parents that they will not be blamed for learning disabilities is critical in the struggle to having children diagnosed early – and to ensuring that they receive the type of professional trained help they need.

[Q.26] Base: Parents with children <18

% agree with the following statement

Learning disabilities are often caused by the home environment children are raised in



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- **Parents say that children with learning disabilities are "different but just as good" as other children. However, parents perceive that LD children struggle with self-esteem.**

  Nearly two-thirds of parents (64%) think that most parents with learning-disabled children view them as "*different but just as good*" as other children; 17% of parents think most parents perceive children with learning disabilities as different but not as good as other children.

  Nearly two-thirds (63%) of parents feel that children with learning disabilities view themselves as different but not as good as other children.

- **Not only do most parents perceive children with learning disabilities as being *as good as* other children, but the overwhelming majority of parents believe that children with LDs have talents and abilities superior to those of the average child.**

  Eight in ten parents agree that children with learning disabilities often have superior leadership, artistic, musical, or athletic skills. Parents' faith in the abilities of learning-disabled children is further evidenced by the high percentage of parents (78%) who reject the idea that children with LDs have to give up their plans for careers that require a lot of education, such as being doctors or lawyers.

  - It is worth noting, however, that parents who feel it causes people more trouble to be labeled learning-disabled (than to struggle privately) are more inclined to feel that children with LDs do have to give up their plans for careers that require a lot of education (by a margin of 38% to 22%).

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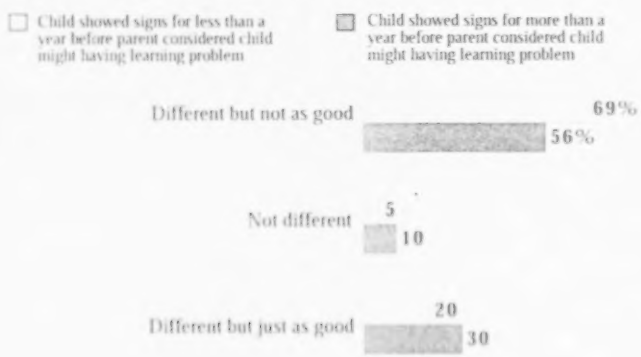
- **Concerns about LD children's self-esteem issues may be linked to some parents' acknowledging their child's learning difficulties sooner rather than later.**

  Among parents who observed their child's difficulties for less than a year, seven in ten (69%) think children with LDs perceive themselves as not as good as other children.

  In contrast, a smaller proportion of parents who waited for their child to show signs of trouble for a year or more before becoming concerned have this view (56%). Thus, parents who waited for their child to show signs of difficulty for a year or more may be less aware of the self-esteem issues facing children who struggle privately with learning disabilities. Focusing education efforts on the self-esteem implications of undiagnosed LDs may help speed up parents' taking action.

[Q. 22] Base: Parents Who Have Considered Their Child Might Have Problems With Learning

% think most children with learning disabilities feel when they compare themselves to other children


Child showed signs for less than a year before parent considered child might having learning problem
Child showed signs for more than a year before parent considered child might having learning problem
Different but not as good
69%
56%
Not different
5
10
Different but just as good
20
30

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- **Findings suggest that college-educated parents may be more concerned about the self-esteem of children with learning disabilities – and the way these children are perceived by others.**

  Seven in ten (71%) college-educated parents think most children with LDs feel they are different *but not as good as other children,* compared to 61% of parents with some college education or less.

  More highly educated parents may be harboring deep concern that their children will not feel or be perceived as equal to other children – or be able to achieve a high level of education.

  The proportion of college-educated parents (30%) who feel that most parents of children with learning disabilities consider their child different but not as good is more than double the proportion of parents with some college education or less (13%) who share this view.

  Although most data suggest that educated people are more enlightened about learning disabilities, we see hints that better educated parents might be more reluctant to seek public help. Perhaps better educated parents fear what it will do to their child's educational and economic prospects to be diagnosed as learning-disabled.

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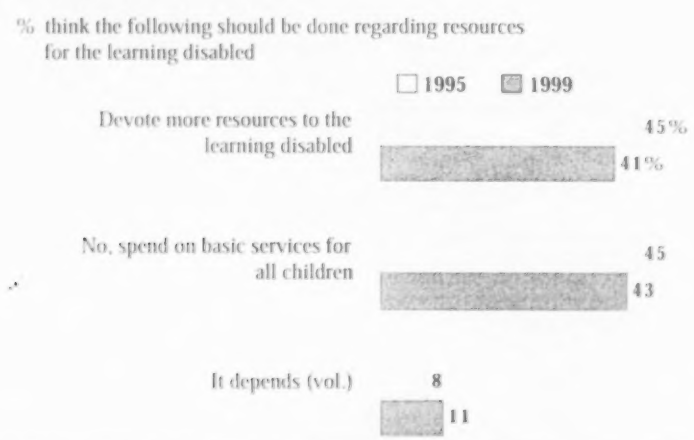
V. Support for Learning-Disabled Children

- **Members of the public remain divided about whether additional resources should be devoted to services for learning-disabled children – reflecting no change from 1995.**

  Four in ten (41%) people advocate devoting more resources to the learning-disabled. However, 43% of people today do not support the idea of allocating additional resources to the learning-disabled and feel instead that resources should be spent on basic services for all children.

[Q. 19] Base: Total



- **People who have experienced an LD either first-hand or through their child are more inclined than the total public to advocate devoting more resources to the learning-disabled.**

  More than half of adults who have been diagnosed with a learning disability (56%) or who are parents of a child who has been diagnosed with a learning disability (52%) feel that more resources should be devoted to helping children with learning disabilities, compared to 41% of the total public.

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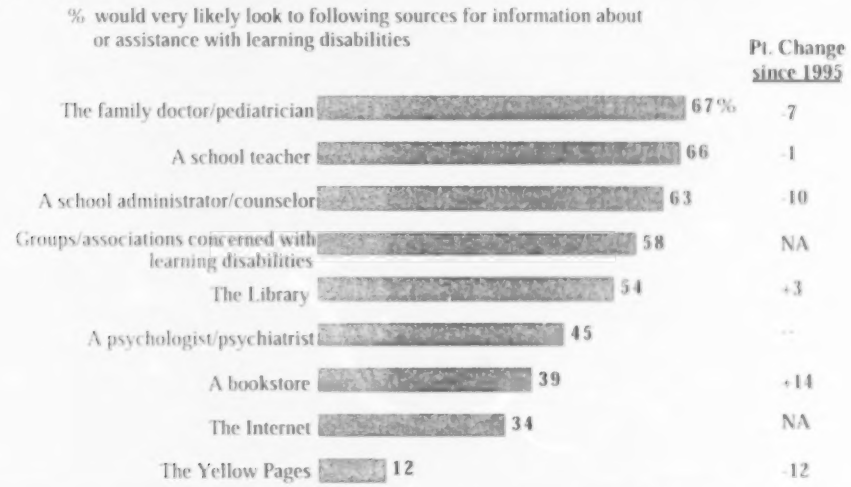
- **Most parents still say they turn to experts for help – but they are also proactively seeking information for themselves.**

  Pediatricians (67%, down 7 points since 1995) and teachers (66%, unchanged) are the sources parents are most likely to turn to for information about learning disabilities.

  However, reflecting national trends toward self-reliance, considerable proportions of parents report that they would very likely turn to the library (54%, up 3 points), bookstores (39%, up 14 points), and the Internet (34%) for information about learning disabilities.

  More than half (58%) of parents say it is very likely that they would turn to groups or associations concerned with learning disabilities for information about this condition.

[Q. 27] Base: Parents with children < 18


% would very likely look to following sources for information about or assistance with learning disabilities
Pt. Change since 1995
The family doctor/pediatrician 67% -7
A school teacher 66 -1
A school administrator/counselor 63 -10
Groups/associations concerned with learning disabilities 58 NA
The Library 54 +3
A psychologist/psychiatrist 45 --
A bookstore 39 +14
The Internet 34 NA
The Yellow Pages 12 -12

Parents who would choose to help their LD child privately are less inclined to turn to the family doctor/pediatrician (59% vs. 72%), schoolteachers (56% vs. 69%), or groups associated with learning disabilities (48% vs. 61%) for information about LDs.

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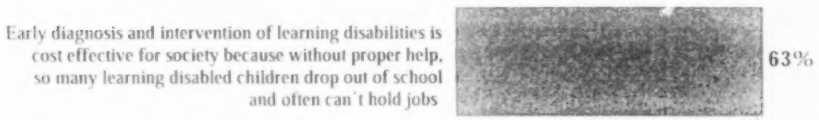
- **Most parents believe that early diagnosis of and intervention in learning disabilities will have a positive impact on individual children and on society.**

  Seven in ten parents (69%) strongly agree that, if children with learning disabilities are helped in the early grades of school, most of them can become at least average students. Besides benefiting the individual child, nearly as many parents feel that early intervention of LDs has positive implications for society as well.

[Q. 26] Base: Parents with children < 18

% strongly agree with following statement people have made about children with learning disabilities


Early diagnosis and intervention of learning disabilities is cost effective for society because without proper help, so many learning disabled children drop out of school and often can't hold jobs
63%

Sixty-three percent of parents strongly agree that early diagnosis of and intervention in learning disabilities is cost-effective for society because, without proper help, many learning-disabled children drop out of school and often cannot hold jobs.

Parents who have considered that their child might have a serious problem learning are even more likely than parents in general to strongly agree that early diagnosis and intervention of LDs has positive implications for society (72% vs. 63% of total parents).

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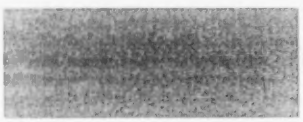
- **Most parents feel that, with proper instruction, children can learn to compensate for their disability. Sixty percent of parents strongly agree that, even though learning disabilities are permanent, with early diagnosis and proper instruction children can be taught skills to compensate for their disability.**

[Q. 26] Base: Parents with children < 18

% strongly agree with following statement people have made about children with learning disabilities


Learning disabilities are permanent, but children can over time be taught to compensate for them with early diagnosis and proper instruction
60%

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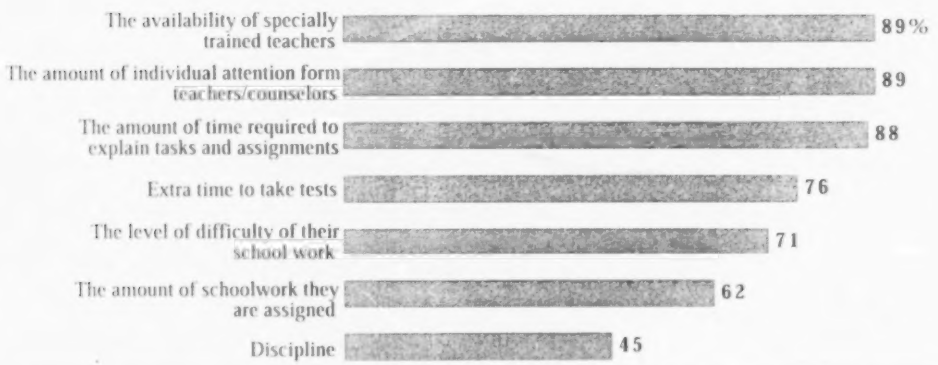
- **The overwhelming majority of parents feel that children with learning disabilities require special treatment.**

  Nine in ten parents feel that children with learning disabilities require special treatment in terms of the amount of individual attention they receive from teachers or counselors (89%) and the availability of specially trained teachers (89%).

  Large proportions of parents also feel that children with learning disabilities require special treatment with respect to the difficulty of their schoolwork (71%) and the amount of schoolwork they are assigned (62%). Fewer than half (45%) feel that children with learning disabilities should be given special treatment with regard to discipline.

[Q. 25] Base: Parents with children < 18

% feel children with learning disabilities require special treatment at school when it comes to the following...



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- **Parents who are most concerned about labeling are also most likely to say that children with LDs need different standards for schoolwork and discipline.**

  Parents who feel it does more harm than good to be labeled learning disabled are more inclined to believe that learning-disabled children require special treatment in terms of the level of difficulty (76% vs. 67%) and the amount of work they are assigned (68% vs. 57%). Parents who feel it is better to struggle privately are also more inclined to say that children with learning disabilities require special treatment with regard to discipline (50% vs. 41%).

- **Many parents believe that working with learning-disabled children requires both extra patience and special training.**

  Nearly half of parents (46%) believe that working with learning-disabled children requires special skills and training as well as extra patience. Somewhat fewer parents (33%) feel that extra patience and understanding alone are adequate. And even fewer (20%) feel that skills and training alone are sufficient to successfully help learning-disabled children.

  Parents who would choose to help their child privately (41%) are more inclined than parents who would help their child publicly (30%) to feel that extra patience and understanding are all that is required to help children with LDs. This may explain why parents who would help their child privately feel they are capable of successfully doing so without outside help or intervention. Parents who would help their child publicly, however, are more inclined to acknowledge that helping children with LDs requires both special skills and extra patience (52% vs. 36% of parents who would help their child privately).

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